

Only God Was Above Us: US band Vampire Weekend surveys a multifarious, crisis-ridden world

Erik Schreiber
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Only God Was Above Us (2024) is rock group Vampire Weekend's first album since 2019. World-shaking events have occurred since that year, including the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Donald Trump's attempted coup, the eruption of the NATO-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel's campaign of genocide in Gaza.

On *Only God Was Above Us*, repeated allusions to war and police violence, among other images, reflect these convulsions. This engagement with the state of the world is welcome. We also hear fond evocations of New York, a paean to a gallerist and wry references to the band's upper-middle-class origins. These lyrics are accompanied by music that combines a kaleidoscopic array of styles and production techniques.

Overall, the album strengthens Vampire Weekend's reputation as a thoughtful, articulate and cosmopolitan band. But hints of complacency and expressions of pessimism weaken an otherwise intelligent and musically impressive effort.

Vampire Weekend was formed in 2005 by Columbia University students who loved African music as much as they loved punk rock. Singer and guitarist Ezra Koenig emerged as the band's leader and chief songwriter. Touring and internet buzz helped to win Vampire Weekend a following even before they released their eponymous debut album in 2008.

Nonchalantly combining African-inspired guitar figures, harpsichord and styles such as chamber pop, punk and calypso, the album sounded utterly distinctive. Listeners were also surprised to encounter a rock band that dressed like preppies and sang about mansard roofs, Oxford commas, Cape Cod and Wellesley College. Rather than conceal their origins,

Vampire Weekend wore them lightly and humorously. Their debut spawned many popular singles, such as "A-Punk," and was embraced warmly by critics and fans.

The subsequent albums *Contra* (2010) and *Modern Vampires of the City* (2013) were also successful. The latter incorporated more "mundane" instruments like piano and had a somewhat muted tone, compared with the buoyant first two releases. On *Father of the Bride* (2019), the band's influences widened to include country music and jam bands such as Phish. Vampire Weekend's earlier effervescence was giving way to reflections on maturity and political crisis. Today, Koenig has entered middle age, and the international political crisis has only deepened. Both factors have colored *Only God Was Above Us*.

"Ice Cream Piano" opens the album with an obscenity hurled at the world, though it is sung gently rather than angrily. "It's about somebody who's either talking to someone or arguing with themselves," Koenig told *Rolling Stone UK*. "They're talking about a fatalism and a cynicism." Subsequent lyrics develop this theme: "You don't want to win this war, / 'Cause you don't want the peace." Later comes a self-indictment: "We're all the sons and daughters / Of vampires who drained the old world's necks."

But these dark lyrics are paired with a lighthearted and rapidly changing arrangement. At the beginning, a buzzing noise establishes a studio setting with electric instruments. But this atmosphere abruptly changes to a flurry of cascading strings. At one point, a guitar that sounds like a theremin makes a disorienting appearance. Then we are in a small room with Koenig as he sings the closing lines. This imaginative, mercurial arrangement evinces humor and imagination,

contrasting sharply with the negativity and violence of the lyrics.

The opening song establishes the album's contradictions right away. The compositions themselves are not elaborate, and even perhaps a bit pat. But the production and arrangements are inspired collages of old and new, electric and acoustic elements. The overall timbre sometimes shifts in the middle of a song without disrupting it. And the lyrics are studded with colorful observations (e.g., "You were born beneath fluorescent light. / You've never seen a starry night."), aphorisms (e.g., "Each generation makes its own apology."), and even warnings (e.g., "You could lose some teeth that way," and "I hope you know your brain's not bulletproof."). Throughout, Koenig's singing is well-mannered and charismatic, educated but not pretentious.

One of the album's lighter moments comes in "Mary Boone," named after a Manhattan gallerist who helped bring artists such as Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Eric Fischl to prominence in the 1980s. By dedicating a song to Boone, Koenig locates himself among the upper-middle-class intelligentsia. Yet, he sounds a self-deprecating note by admitting that he "Came in from Jersey, not from Brooklyn." A glittering piano arpeggio is played against a hip-hop beat. Koenig sings the whimsical lyrics straight: "Mary Boone, Mary Boone. / Well, I hope you feel like lovin' someone soon." A female choir takes up this refrain, flirting with the ridiculous. But even this song contains regret: "We always wanted money, / Now the money's not the same." The overall effect here, as on much of the album, is wistful and ambivalent.

"Pravda," which opens with an African guitar figure, also combines disparate tones of voice. "I know what lies beneath Manhattan," Koenig sings. "I know who's buried in Grant's tomb." Despite the old joke in the latter line, this couplet conjures a sense of danger and of things left unsaid. "They always ask me about *Pravda*," Koenig continues, "It's just the Russian word for truth." Of course, it's not just that, as Koenig surely knows: it was the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Koenig also offers a cold dismissal: "Your consciousness is not my problem. / 'Cause when I come home, it won't be home to you." Despite humorous moments, the song is slightly unsettling.

The closing, and longest, song implicitly conveys the album's defining statement. "Hope" begins with slow, deliberate drums and an echoey piano. With each verse, a straight-faced Koenig brings new images of defeat: "The bull has gored the matador," "The phoenix burned but did not rise," "The painting burned, the statue drowned," "The sentencing was overturned." Each verse ends with the admonition "I hope you let it go." In the chorus, this admonition is paired with the observation that "The enemy's invincible."

The song seems to encapsulate the melancholy of the comfortable, urbane middle class as it contemplates the world's crises—from which it no longer feels itself to be at a safe remove. It is a song of surrender. Koenig told *Rolling Stone UK* that the album is "a journey from cynicism to optimism; from skepticism to faith," but this view is hard to square with the despair of "Hope."

With its shifting, adventurous musical arrangements, *Only God Was Above Us* conveys *joie de vivre* and manifest possibility. These elements find parallels in the lyrics' jokes and improbable allusions. But more often, the lyrics contrast with the music by evoking things lost and never retrieved, things that cannot be undone and even a sense of impending doom.

Despite offering an abundance of concrete, living details, Koenig puts a certain distance between himself and the world. Though sometimes warm, the lyrics are rarely, if ever, personal. Koenig may be affecting an above-it-all wisdom, but this feint may well reflect his own confusion. One wonders what he and the band could achieve if they had a sense of revolutionary optimism.



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